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SHOULD HISTORIANS WRITE CONTEMPORARY HISTORY?

By HENRY STEELE COMMAGER

NOTHING in postwar publishing history," says the *New York Times*, "has aroused such outrage as the flood of memoirs about President Kennedy that is cascading toward the bookstalls." "Outrage" is perhaps too strong a term for the reaction; what we have, rather, is dismay and alarm. Is it proper for those who hold positions of confidence, those who have enjoyed the intimacy of men in high places, to reveal the confidences and report the circumstances of the intimacies? The question sounds simple, but is really difficult. Is it a question of "confidence" in any genuine sense? Is there any evidence that what Professor Arthur Schlesinger and Theodore Sorensen are now revealing was told them in confidence explicit or implicit? Or is it all perhaps merely a matter of timing: Do confidences lose their radioactivity, as it were, with the passing of time? Is it one of right, or of wisdom, or merely of good taste?

Much of the reaction to recent disclosures, particularly those by Arthur Schlesinger, has been superficial and intemperate. This is not "history," we are told, but something different; it is "keyhole history"; it is "mischievous gossip"; it is a "breach of historical propriety" or a "breach of confidence." But the issues that emerge transcend propriety or taste (the standards here are anything but clear) or even the right of privacy. They involve considerations of the nature of history and the responsibility of the historian, the claims of public interest, and the nature of techniques of censorship.

Hard cases, Justice Holmes observed, make bad law. That is nowhere more true than in the broad area of censorship, tangible or intangible. It is almost always the hard case that attracts attention and precipitates an issue; and each

case—whether the invasion of privacy, the violation of good taste, or the expression of pernicious ideas—always seems, to some vigilant critics, so serious that it calls for emergency action regardless of principles or of due process.

Thus the Schlesinger and the Sorensen books are discussed as if they constitute new and unique examples of the invasion of privacy, the exploitation of intimacy, or the criticism of public officials by indirection.

But this is not a new problem. Ever since Thucydides, historians have been writing about their contemporaries, and no one thinks the worse of Clarendon, or Bolingbroke, or, for that matter, of Herndon or Badeau, of Hopkins and of Ickes, for writing of the Administrations they served and the monarchs or the Presidents they knew. But there is a new aspect and a new urgency to the problem today. Lincoln must have known that Nicolay and Hay were historical-minded, and Franklin Roosevelt had historians in his official entourage, but no President before Kennedy had chosen a historian as a confidant. Now President Johnson has a historian on his staff, and it is a safe prediction that the historian will become, in the future, as familiar a feature of the White House landscape as the press secretary or the social secretary. If we are to lay down ground rules for the recording of history, it is a good idea not to formulate them on the basis of emotional reaction to a particular and highly unusual case.

It is the statement that by '63 President Kennedy "made up his mind to accept Rusk's resignation after the 1964 election, and seek a new Secretary" that has excited the sharpest attention and the most ardent controversy. The objections to this allegation really boil down to a question of "good taste." If the allegation is untrue, or misleading, others (like Vice President Humphrey) will challenge it. If it is true, it by no means

follows that it weakens Secretary Rusk's position, nor does it commit President Johnson. One President is not required, or expected, to adopt the views of another; the important thing is that President Johnson has confidence in Mr. Rusk.

INDEED the excitement over revelations of Kennedy's attitude toward Secretary Rusk—an attitude of somewhat exasperated admiration—is for the most part factitious. More important, certainly more relevant to the current situation, is Schlesinger's demonstration of Secretary McNamara's lack of foresight and his preference for solutions that lent themselves to statistical computation, or his revelation that Governor Harriman lacked confidence in the military and particularly in General Krulack, whom he thought "a fool." Surely more important is the story—we may almost say the evidence—that the CIA deliberately deceived both Secretary Rusk and Ambassador Stevenson at the time of the Bay of Pigs crisis, and, again, that in 1959 the CIA usurped the prerogatives of the State Department and, presumably, of President Eisenhower, in conducting its own foreign policy in Laos, and that at one time the Phoumi regime in Laos was receiving American military aid while the neutralized Soudanese government was receiving economic aid. Assuredly far more sobering than any criticism of Rusk is Schlesinger's verdict on the CIA that "The CIA had its own political desks and military staffs; it had in effect its own foreign service, its own air force, even, on occasion, its own combat forces. Moreover the CIA declined to clear its clandestine intelligence operations either with the State Department in Washington or with the Ambassador in the field."

It is a good idea to keep in mind that neither Schlesinger nor Sorensen was an "official" historian; neither was under

THE FINAL
John F. Kennedy
 BY HIS PERSONAL SECRETARY

John F. Kennedy

Schlesinger on the Frontier

JFK: Time's Toll

The JFK Legend

MARQUIS CHURCH

President Kennedy Rated 'Doers' Over 'Thinkers'

Schlesinger Says Kennedy Downgraded Vietnam

Believes President Later Snub War as 'His Great Failure'

The Rust-

James A. Weir

LET us turn, then, to the pros and cons of this debate over the wisdom, propriety, and utility of such revelations as are coming from Schlesinger and Sorensen.

Here are some of the arguments that are advanced against encouraging "pre-mature" publication of affairs of state.

Closely allied with this is a second consideration, that publication of confi-

Third, it is alleged that premature disclosures may do harm to historical truth and understanding. With the best will in the world, historians who make such revelations cannot but be partial, the revelations themselves incomplete and misleading. We know from a hundred earlier examples that anyone may misunderstand or misinterpret what he hears, or that his memory may play him false. Thus, to place authority behind a statement of policy or a judgment of character, when he who made it is no longer here to explain or elaborate it, is to harden prematurely the crust, to fix prematurely the pattern, of history.

The very danger that what was said, even if not in confidence, but merely in a moment of exasperation, or of irritability, might be reported could well inhibit those in positions of authority from speaking their minds at all, and might thus deny them an essential safety valve. Everyone needs such a safety valve, and those who bear heavy burdens need it with special urgency.

It would be absurd to suppose that writers like Professor Schlesinger and Mr. Sorensen have failed to consider all of these objections, to weigh them in the balance against the arguments for publication of what clearly appears to them to be valid history, just as it would be absurd to suppose that they have not, in fact, exercised discretion and restraint in what they have said or not said at all times.

What are some of the arguments for

First, almost any historical or biographical study of the contemporary scene is bound to leave a trail of hurt feelings and injured *amour-propre*. Where only private persons are concerned, and there is no public interest in disclosures that might prove painful, there is a strong case for discretion and even for silence. But with public figures, or those whose careers affect the public, the situation is quite different. Disclosures, comments, interpretations of all kinds, just and unjust, generous and ungenerous, are part of the risks of the game and those who go into public life must be prepared to take the risks. Indeed, if we grant that there is no legitimate public interest in purely private persons, it might be asserted that the more exalted the public person the more legitimate the public interest.

WHAT of the allegation that early disclosure is bound to be partial and fragmentary, and therefore does not so much reveal, as falsify, history? True enough, but this is a criticism of all history, not just of contemporary. Historians can never hope to know the whole truth about the battle of Waterloo, the attack on Fort Sumpter, or the negotiations at Munich. If it be said that we should wait until all the evidence is available, it will be answered that all the evidence will never be available. The danger of holding off publication to some distant future is far greater than the danger of "premature" publication, and this for two obvious reasons: First, that the record might never be put down at all (who can doubt that the prospect of publication is an immense stimulus to literary creation?); second, that if we wait until all those who might be embarrassed or chagrined by any disclosures have passed from the scene, there will not be that opportunity for chal-

lenge, correction, explanation, and elaboration so essential to arriving at the final verdict. Douglas Freeman used to say that there was nothing like a court-martial for getting at the truth about a battle or a campaign; perhaps charges and countercharges are not less necessary in arriving at the truth about politics or diplomacy.

But there is a larger consideration than any that might be regarded as merely professional. It is the public interest in getting at the truth. In our kind of society the whole public has an obligation and a right to know all that can be known about the conduct of public affairs; only if there is provision for and assurance of this can the principle of "eternal vigilance" operate. Experience has no doubt shown that some things are better arranged without the public—or the television cameras—looking over the shoulders of those who are engaged in hammering out policies. It is not a good idea—to take an extreme example—to let the public in on decision-making in time of war; it is not helpful to have "open diplomacy" if that means letting in the reporters to

record the give and take around the conference table. But we all know that secrecy is the first resort of those who do not want to give an account of themselves, and that secrecy is used to cover a multitude of sins of omission and of commission—ineptitude, incompetence, blundering, and even wickedness. As the *Guardian* of Manchester has recently observed, the British policy of withholding information about government policies for fifty years "seems to be little more than politicians' and civil servants' dislike of being made to feel uncomfortable, together with the national propensity to keep power within a small elite."

We cannot, for example, have much sympathy with those who allege that secrecy is so essential to detecting law-breakers that officials must be allowed to indulge in wiretapping; the public interest in discouraging wiretapping is greater than its interest in detecting criminals. We cannot have sympathy with those who allege that secrecy is so essential to ferreting out "subversives" that the ancient protections of due process must go by the board; preserv-

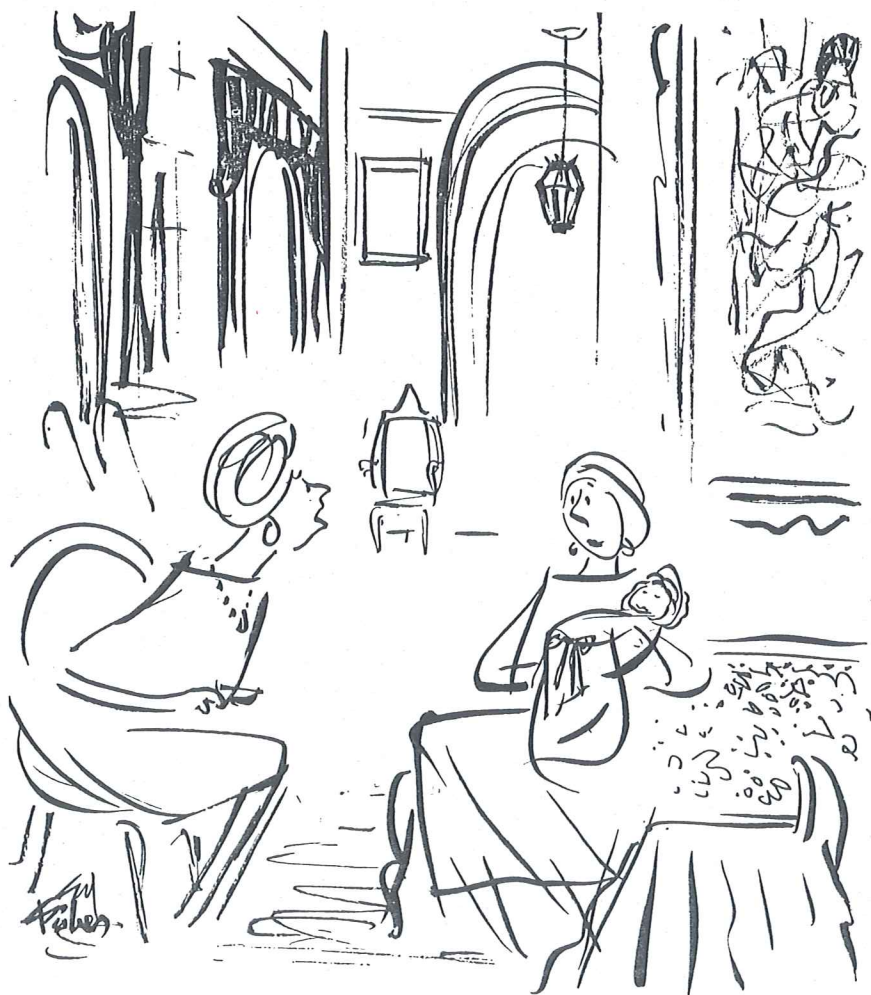
ing due process is more important than detecting alleged subversives. Those who invoke secrecy in these areas do not come into court with clean hands, and we are justified in thinking the same of those who invoke secrecy in other areas.

Thus there are doubtless risks in premature publication, but these are far less than the risks of tardy publication or of no publication. The risk to men in high places that their ill-considered remarks or opinions may echo in history long after they are gone is real, too, but far less serious than the risk that those in positions of power may come to rely on immunity from awkward disclosures.

Much of the current controversy over premature or indiscreet disclosure focuses on Professor Schlesinger's revelations about President Kennedy's attitude toward the State Department, the Pentagon, and the CIA. Now leaving aside the argument of bad taste—for it may be bad taste *not* to disclose facts to the public—is it really clear that the revelation of the President's disillusionment with the CIA and the Pentagon and his misgivings about the State Department are contrary to public interest? If the President was mistaken (or if Professor Schlesinger proves to be mistaken in his report) it is highly improbable that the position of the Pentagon, the CIA or the State will be damaged. If the Presidential judgment—or disillusionment—was justified, however, it is clearly to the interest of the nation that this be known. Thus if the CIA is really deceiving almost everybody in the government from the President down, the sooner the public knows this the better. In either event the controversy can safely be relied upon to bring into the open criticisms that have heretofore been covert, and that is all to the good. Finally, if, as has been asserted, President Kennedy's failure to act on his convictions reveals a weakness—rather than mere amiability—in his character, that, too, is a consideration of importance to the student of the executive power.

But it will be asserted that disclosures such as those by Professor Schlesinger suffer from an inherent and ineradicable vice: that no matter how accurate, how well authenticated, they may be, they are still misleading, for they leave out all the atmosphere, the nuances, the tone of voice, the gestures—all those things that suffuse any statement with a special meaning that even the highest literary art can rarely recapture. True enough, but this is true of all historical reporting with a few exceptions such as Boswell's *Johnson* or Herndon's *Lincoln*. Furthermore, there is a built-in protection here: the common sense of readers. Surely none familiar with the literature of politics will be so literal-minded as to accept whatever is reported at face value. Read-

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"But how could you bring another human being into such a world!
Unobtainable servants! Imitation mink! Open enrolment at Radcliffe! ..."

Contemporary History

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ers can be expected to know something about human nature, even Presidential nature, which is not very different—and they will keep in mind that Presidents like to blow off steam, or indulge their sense of humor, or of mischief, just as they will keep in mind that Presidents, like other people, are not always masters in their own House: remember Lincoln's wistful remark to the importunate petitioner, "Madame, I have no influence with this administration." As we all allow for the play of personality in ourselves and in our own associates, so we all make allowances for it in public men. Who now holds it against Lincoln that he could never resist telling a good story; who counts it against Churchill that his wit was irrepressible?

What shall we say of a fourth objection, that the danger of unseemly publication may induce timidity or counsel silence, in those who should be encouraged to speak their minds, and that it will thus invite more stringent rules about security or about publication? A serious consideration, this, for what we need is less restriction, not more. But may we not say of this problem what Justice Holmes said of an analogous situation: "Not while this court sits"?

These matters are, after all, up to the President, the Secretary, the General, whoever is involved. If he knows that he is indiscreet, or if he fears disclosures, he may impose his own security measures, and doubtless will; Mr. Schlesinger himself gives some examples of this. The simplest of all security measures is for the President not to invite historians or journalists to be part of his official family, not to give them his confidence. Presidents are, after all, in command of the situation. If they appoint a Boswell to act as recorder they must be presumed to know what they are about. We cannot lay down the rules; a Roosevelt, a Kennedy, a Johnson will lay down his own rules, and everything is to be gained from variety and experimentation.

What of the final objection, that unrestricted or premature disclosure may impair the national security? We need not take this charge seriously. In the first place, the kind of men who win the confidence of Presidents can be expected to be quite as patriotic as the rest of us, and quite as intelligent, too. It is most improbable that they would knowingly impair the national interest. Second, the cry of "security" is one which we have learned to discount; it rings out whenever there is anything to conceal. There is, after all, a national interest in knowing all the facts of public affairs as soon as possible, which overrides any interest in concealing facts as long as possible.

It is more important, for example, that the pros and cons of major issues—let us say the Bay of Pigs episode—be aired, and that the public be invited to weigh the charges of incompetence in the CIA and the Pentagon, than that these matters be hushed up, or that any branch of government be shielded from publicity and criticism.

All very well, it will be said, but this assumes that a Roosevelt, a Kennedy, an Eisenhower, a Johnson will be there to impose his wishes on those to whom he gives his confidence. What happens when fate intervenes—as it did in April 1865, in September 1919, in November 1963? There is perhaps no answer to this challenge other than the elementary observation that principles of conduct should not be based on exceptions or on fortuity. Furthermore, in our kind of society much must of necessity be left to the common sense, the intelligence, and the virtue of the individual. We cannot contrive rules to anticipate all conceivable vagaries of human character.

We may confidently believe that no President or high official will put his confidence in men palpably wanting in judgment or integrity. We may confidently assume that the public is intelligent enough to disregard writers clearly wanting in judiciousness or integrity. We

may be sure, too, that the principle of the countervailing force will operate: that each disclosure will call forth other disclosures, each interpretation inspire other interpretations, and that, out of all this, something like the truth will eventually emerge. This is the familiar method of history in free societies; the alternative is "official" history.

Those who would, directly or indirectly, impose restraints upon the historian are, for the most part, those who believe in censorship in other realms as well—in literature, art, drama, politics, and history. They are the men who are sure that while they can always be trusted to think for themselves; others cannot. They assume that the public is a great booby, easily misled. They know that *they* do not need protection, but they assume that the public does need protection. They are those who believe that government and politics are mysterious things, that politicians and the military operate in some esoteric fashion which can be understood only by the initiate, and that their operations should therefore be shrouded in secrecy. They are basically men of little faith, who do not trust the common sense of their fellow men or the ability of truth to survive the competition in the market place of ideas.



"Know the joy of helping someone without the slightest danger to yourself of getting involved."